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IN PRAISE OF SPYING

Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition by Stansfield Turner

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"Arrogant, insensitive, absurd ideas . . . [he] has ruined the place. . . ." That was the common run of rightward Washington comment on Stansfield Turner as director of Central Intelligence by the end of 1977, his first year in office. By then Jimmy Carter no longer maintained his deceptive pretension to bi-Pauline balance. Of his two supposedly coequal chief advisers, Paul Nitze was moving toward conspicuous opposition, while Paul Warnke was running arms control policy, the only strategy that aroused the president's enthusiasm. For the rightward thinking, the stories coming out of the CIA—about the 2,000 covert-branch officers abruptly fired on Halloween day to "emasculate" the country's espionage abilities, about the placement of narrow-minded Navy officers in key positions, about the new director's disruptive managerial changes—seemed quite consistent with the revealed character of the Carter administration. The Annapolis graduate who seemed set on ruining the nation's defenses had found a classmate to ruin the CIA for him.

But this reviewer, as rightward-thinking as any, was nevertheless denied the clarity of that analysis, for he had heard it all several years before. At that time it came in regard to Stansfield Turner's term as president of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, the place where the Navy's future admirals are supposed to be educated. It was on a working visit, some months after Turner's appointment in 1972, that I heard the complaints from officer-students, and from some of the faculty too. In fact, the place was then being greatly transformed by Turner, in ways most uncomfortable.

With its Mahanian vitality long since spent, the college had been in the business of offering an extended vacation in Newport's pleasant surroundings to Navy mid-level officers between command tours and career-enhancing headquarters assignments. Its staff was just as comfortable, teaching an antiquated curriculum replete with self-congratulatory Navy banalities, punctuated by more of the same from visiting lecturers, who were often retired admirals. By tacit arrangement, Turner's predecessors had indulgently overlooked the somnolence of the teaching staff, while the staff in turn was just as indulgent with the officer-students.

To break this pattern, Turner brought in a cadre of civilians and selected Navy officers of unusual intellectual quality to formulate a drastically revised curriculum; the new studies were to be strong on both the truly modern and the ancient classics, in lieu of the merely outdated. He created a center for advanced studies under James E. King to set scholarly standards for the entire college, showed a remarkable instinct for picking out the talented in his inherited teaching staff while he forced out the rest, and made it clear to the students that they were in Newport to read broadly, think freely, and study hard—and not to indulge in suburban repose with some fishing thrown in.

The "arrogance" that his critics complained of referred to Turner's dismal opinion of the college as it had been. He was "insensitive" because he refused to tolerate private indulgence at public expense. His "absurd ideas" were such things as the compulsory reading of Thucydides, instead of the memoirs of retired admirals or of nothing at all. The ruination Turner was inflicting was the hard work imposed on both officer-students and the staff, as well as his insistence that bright academics and serious men of affairs be invited to give the frequent outside lectures. Thus he displaced the previous cycle of visitors, the retired admirals who so greatly relished the Navy's VIP privileges in the luxurious college "cabin" before and after their "When I was in command of. . ." lectures of complacency. Trivial in itself, this last outrage was important in its consequences: the retired cohorts spread the word that Turner was trying to educate a new kind of naval officer, who might question the sacred pieties—including the sanctum sanctorum of the aircraft carrier, and the huger-is-better school of thought in ship design in general.

In the Central Intelligence Agency, too, Turner imposed, or tried to impose, painful transformations, and to eliminate staff. In that case, again, it was the retired cohorts above all—surprisingly well-connected in the media—who blackened his reputation outside the institution's walls. Among the other managerial efforts recorded in his book, Turner wanted to place the CIA's traditionally independent three major branches under a joint administration. At the same time, he sought to elevate two of them, the analytic and technical, toward equality with the traditionally dominant "operations" branch, which gathers information by espionage and carries out covert action. Moreover, Turner reduced that latter branch by 820 posts. Most of those operations officers were eliminated by transfers and scheduled retirement. (According to Turner, only 17 people were dismissed and 147 others forced into early retirement—far from the 820, let alone the 2,000, of media gossip.) It seems, in fact, that a 1,350-post reduction had been called for by the branch itself during the previous administration, although over a five-year period instead of Turner's two.

In his other role—as director of Central Intelligence, as opposed to head of the CIA as such—Turner had less success in coordinating the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency (the military's own analysis shop), the amply funded National Security Agency (which gathers electronic intelligence in order to do its own analysis), and the State Department's intelligence and research bureau. He was even less successful in obtaining cooperation from the intelligence organizations of each military service; his own Navy's organization was the most defiant of all. The president, it turns out, wanted his own "raw data" to play with, and without his backing Turner's attempts could only fail. By sheer obstructionism, the NSA and the rest even defeated Turner's utterly modest ambition of imposing a unified system on the chaos of 50-odd overlapping and obscure "codeword" classifications, which are supposed to regulate secrecy above the common run of "top secret."

I have no notion of the wisdom or weaknesses of Turner's managerial changes, nor can I judge whether reforms, however wise in theory, were

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